

## **Evangelical Distinctives and Current Dialogues (First study) 2 Peter 3.13-18**

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“Dialogue” has grown into a favorite word in Christendom. General conditions (including large-scale emigration), changes in the mind-set of many among the “late modern,” the rise of the Ecumenical Movement, have led to unprecedented exchanges between churches, and trends in the churches, that had long ignored one another. Some fear (or hope) that they will blur the contours of identities, and, in the case of evangelicalism, of its unique stand or testimony. Others argue the opposite: that amicable confrontation makes one more conscious of one’s distinctives. Likely, both outcomes may be observed. This situation prompts us to “revisit” the evangelical distinctives in the present dialogical situation. Before we embark on that task itself, however, some preliminary considerations may prove helpful.

1. On dialogue. Ambiguity often contributes to a word being popular! It should be fought against nonetheless: we are called to walk in the light, not in convenient mist! The range of possible meanings goes from a simple equivalence of conversation (talking with each other, nothing more) to an ideologically loaded understanding for which entering into dialogue implies acknowledging the other’s position as totally legitimate, objectively as well as subjectively, equally with one’s own. Already in the weakest sense, dialogue requires commitment of a sort: it is one or several steps removed from remaining immured in suspicious silence or from shouting at each other; when people start talking, the public rightly thinks that they are no longer the foes they were in former times. I consider that such dialogue pertains to our calling today. Dialogue in the strongest (actually relativistic) sense, in conscience I cannot sustain: to my perception, it would require forsaking the assurance of faith, in blatant opposition to biblical teaching and practice; no epochè of our allegiance to the Lord (one may not put it in brackets). In between the two “extreme” senses, dialogue involves attitudes of openness and goodwill, the discipline of listening first and letting the others define their own position themselves (not telling them what they really believe), seeing things as they see them, plus a sincere desire of being enriched, even corrected, by their input, plus a focus on positive features, a preference for “what unites”. These are not purely the expression of Christian virtues; they are indeed fraught with dangers; they require discernment in each case.

2. On identity. The term “identity” has also grown more frequent in recent years, and this should spur some reflection. It may reveal a most suspect concern for self instead of truth – or, in order to protect “dialogue”, to avoid saying the other is not in the truth, a fear of confrontation “in the light”. Paul Ricoeur also uncovered the duality in the very notion: he sharply distinguished between identity *idem* and identity *ipse*... David Bebbington’s description of the four main traits of evangelical identity – biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism – has been well-received. Combined with the appreciation of evangelical diversities, it is helpful indeed, but it leans on the *idem* side, and a brief historical sketch may add some *ipse* aspects.

3. On evangelical genealogy. “Evangelical” (évangélique, evangelisch) was first used to designate a specific part of the Christian spectrum in Reformation times: for those who adhered to the Reformation movement. This remains the first root of present day evangelicalism. But the word, first in the English-speaking world, was used in a narrower way, beginning in the XVIIIth century, for the “Evangelical Awakening”, and for those (especially within the Anglican church) embraced the message and spirituality of Revival. This was the second root. To account for evangelical identity, one has probably to add the effect on the heirs of Reformation-and-Revival of the victory of liberalism/modernism in most denominations: one could speak of Resistance, or better (especially in recent decades) of Recovery (if not Reconquista); in German, the trace of this third element has been the introduction of the word “evangelikal” since “evangelisch” had lost all precision. My presentation shall follow the duality of the two “roots” of evangelicalism.

### I Evangelicalism and Orthodox Discipline (“Order”)

No make-up: I am choosing austere words – so they sound to the ears of many – but we should face reality. “Discipline” befits disciples, and is a valid translation of that key word of OT wisdom, *mûsar*. “Orthodoxy,” right thought and praise (there is no praiseworthy praise that is not founded on truth), is an obvious concern of the apostles (e.g. Rom 16.17), with the repeated call to oneness in thinking (to *hen phronountes*). Evangelicalism understands itself as faithfulness to “historic Christianity,” another name for orthodoxy, with effective consequences in church life (discipline), at a time when many who call themselves “Christian” no longer uphold the same or, at least, do not require others, in their churches, to do so.

1. Jesus is Lord. The first concern of evangelicals is to maintain the original confession, with all its implications. These were correctly spelled out, they believe, in the symbols of Nicea and Chalcedon. The deity of Jesus Christ, in Athanasius’ sense, is the very heart of evangelical faith; we denounce as anti-Christian all evasions or attenuations (Jesus God as the fully “God-informed” man, Jesus God as the man made one with God...); we do believe that the iota that distinguishes *homoousios* and *homoiousios* represents the greatest difference that may be conceived, the difference between Creator and creature. Together with this confession go the emphasis on the Events of Christ’s life, especially his bodily resurrection as historical, and the doctrine of the Trinity. The human nature of Christ is also affirmed (it is vital for the doctrine of atonement), but not always as fully as

one could wish – although the docetic temptation has been much less obvious than in the great Catholic orthodox tradition.

2. Scripture is the Word of God. Evangelicals are probably known by that trait more than by any other, in modern Christendom. For most of them, I believe, it proceeds directly from their confession of Jesus as Lord (this fact most irksome to J. Barr), for it cannot be doubted historically that Jesus held such a view of the Hebrew Scriptures. The conviction that God himself speaks to us in Scripture entails the affirmation of its inerrancy. This notion (carefully defined by the Chicago Statement, and which is most traditional from earliest Patristic times onwards) can be said to be, with some paradox, both vital and peripheral; as a citadel may be for a nation... The conviction applies to the Canon, that of the Jewish official authorities for the Old Testament (they were entrusted with the Old Covenant oracles) and that of the de facto consensus of almost all Christian churches for the NT. The most sensitive issue relates to the critical treatment of Scripture. When the nonorthodox attack the traditional view of Scripture, the very Word of God, they may use convoluted and paralogical arguments that claim to be theological, but the real basis of their conviction is what they consider the assured result of the only honest and competent handling of Scriptural data: biblical criticism. This is the most difficult front in the spiritual battle. I believe evangelicals have sufficient replies as they criticise the critics, at various levels (presuppositions, procedures, evidence taken into account). Closely connected with the debate on Scripture and the critical method as currently applied is the one on the notion of truth and on hermeneutics. There is room for some diversity among evangelical scholars (since philosophical ties are obvious); in general it may be said that evangelicals tend to epistemological realism, though with different connections.

3. God's Law remains normative. Though evangelicalism, already at the time of the Reformation, has included minority antinomian trends (stemming from misunderstandings of the "Christ end of the law" passages), concern for the normative use of God's Law has been a strong feature, both in the Reformed tradition (Baptist as well as Pedobaptist) and in the Wesleyan tradition, with the emphasis on sanctification (even if the vocabulary was not the same). Today, it is an orthodox distinctive of evangelicals that they maintain the authority of the Commandments, and the corpus of traditional ethics, as binding for Christian conscience, when liberals usually condone the evolution of common mores. This stance allows evangelicals to accept "co-belligerence" with Roman Catholics on ethical issues (with the question of Islam as a possible partner raised).

4. Sin is the problem to solve. Evangelicalism, in contradistinction with a tendency of Catholic tradition (Incarnationist) and most liberal theologies insists that metaphysical difference (human finitude...) is no problem in the relationship of humankind with God: it belongs to the harmony of creation. The reality of sin, the abuse and misuse of created freedom, before God and in disobedience to his command, is emphasised. This is done also against optimistic ("Pelagian") underestimate of the gravity of sin and the depth of its bondage, and against a denial of objective guilt as ensuing from sinful acts or dispositions. The focal point of the Good News, as preached by evangelicals, is found, consequently, in the doing away of guilt by Christ's substitutionary atonement for sins –

as will be expounded in another session. This message that was, for a long time, also preached by Roman Catholics (though all the consequences were not drawn), has become a distinctive of evangelicalism.

### **(Second Study)**

#### **Galatians 4.28-5.1**

#### II Evangelicalism and spiritual freedom (“Ardor”)

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor 3.17). The association of Spirit and freedom has been frequent in church history (the Brothers of the Free Spirit...), and it has been characteristic of much of evangelicalism. It was not absent from the XVIth century Reformation, even the “magisterial” one, and has been prominent in the Revival tradition, with the latest expression in the so-called “Charismatic Movement”. The various facets of liberty in the Spirit are also faces of evangelicalism.

1. Evangelicals are free from intermediaries. In contradistinction with the tendency, in Catholic piety, to multiply intermediary agents, to pray for the intercession of the saints and of the Virgin Mary, to trust in the care of one's guardian angel, Evangelicals claim the filial privilege of a direct access to God and of an intimate fellowship with him. They also contrast the enjoyment of the divine presence with the cerebral character of much liberal Christianity, as they see it (mere adherence to ideas and ideals, especially ethical). The adjective immediate may not be strictly accurate, however, for the mediation of the Word should be stressed, by which and through which the Spirit works. The decisive point is that the Mediator is no “intermediary,” half-way between God and human beings, but both God himself and man, and his Spirit is God himself - such a presence indwelling our creaturely nature that a spiritual union ensues (1 Cor 6.17). The access to God in full freedom is a NT privilege, which the renting of the Temple veil symbolically proclaimed (Matt 27.51; Heb 10.20). The preparatory role of the OT regime entailed a temporary dimension of bondage, bondage to the “elements of the world” (*stoikheia tou kosmou*, Gal 4.9); evangelicals interpret the insertion of intermediaries into the piety of other parts of Christendom as a lapse back into OT conditions.

2. Freedom from institutional tutelage. The most important of all intermediaries, in Catholic forms of Christianity, is that of the church herself, considered as an institution, a salvific agency (*Heilsanstalt*): the Mother of the faithful, *Mater et Magistra*, she precedes them and gives birth to their Christian selves (endowed with supernatural life); she rightly requires their loving obedience; her magisterium is guaranteed against deviation (infallible in its supreme expressions). Evangelicals categorically reject such claims. In his famous *Het Calvinisme*, for instance, Abraham Kuyper could write of the church: “She is no 'Heilsanstalt', that imparts grace as medicine, no mystical spiritual order that operates magically over the laity. She is nothing else than believing, confessing persons...” (p.54). Schleiermacher's summary is valid for evangelicals: For Catholics the church is first and believers are the fruit of the church's operation; for Protestants, the believers' relationship to God (through the Word and the Spirit) comes first, and the

church is constituted as the fruit thereof. The churches of the magisterial Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed (Anglican), do retain the theme of the visible, institutional church and may apply to it the metaphor of motherhood (so Calvin, not in the early but in the later stages of his ministry). But they are careful severely to limit its prerogatives. It is by no means infallible. Its membership is mixed (not all true Christians). It is only one of the aids that the Lord has provided to help our weakness (Calvin's title of the Institutes IV). Our gratitude and reverence does not curtail Christian freedom; the right and duty of personal examination remains, after the model of the Bereans (Ac 17.11). The rise of Pietism and subsequent Revivals have reduced the weight of church institutions still more drastically, with the category of nominal Christians (= no true ones) coming to play a major role (as Barr complains). American evangelicalism (and British to a degree) has recently witnessed in some quarters a dissatisfaction with its typical stance regarding the institutional church; apart from a number of conversions to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (especially the Patriarchate of Antioch), a call for a more Catholic style in evangelical churches has been heard. My prognosis (tentatively) is that no lasting compromise shall be found: sooner or later, the people concerned shall have to choose between the two "identities".

3. Freedom from sacramentalism. Whether the sacraments are considered first and foremost as the actions of the institutional church, in which she fulfills her mediatorial role for salvation, or are given a measure of independence, even priority, over her global structure, there is a very close linkage between church and sacraments in Catholic Christianity. It is marked by sacramentalism, the tendency to ascribe to the sacraments a causal efficacy in the communication of divine grace: they play a major role, they are supposed to convey and to confer the spiritual reality they represent (baptism effects regeneration, etc.). Sacramentalism is far from homogeneous: it expresses itself in various degrees of force, different theological understandings colour it with different hues. Nevertheless, evangelicalism has been almost unanimously adverse to sacramentalism. And this opposition may be spelt freedom: evangelicals affirm that the grace of which the sacraments are signs is given to faith alone, without anyone having to submit to a rite (that is a work) in order to obtain salvation: only believe and you shall be saved. The necessity of the sacraments is no *necessitas medii*, but *praecepti* (the older Lutheran theologians would say *necessitas medii* but *ordinata*, not absolute). The clear stand against sacramentalism belongs to the heirs of the Radical Reformation (Anabaptists) and to the Reformed tradition (despite misguided attempts to read Calvin in a sacramentalistic manner). Lutherans, however, (and some evangelical Anglicans in the last decades) have kept a sizable chunk of sacramentalism: does this cast a serious doubt on my main proposition? Actually, it appears that Lutheran Pietists also de-emphasise the sacraments, compared with their fellow-Lutherans. Two features of Lutheran doctrine may help them at this juncture: the grace of the sacrament is received by faith alone, even in the case of infants baptised (and it is the same grace as the grace of the Word, which may be received by faith apart from the sacrament); this grace may be lost, so that persons who were regenerated in infancy, or later as well, may be called to conversion today. Evangelical Lutherans can thus accord to a large extent with their non-sacramentalistic fellow-evangelicals.

4. Freedom of personal commitment. The freedom from external constraints they enjoy in the Spirit, evangelicals also understand positively: as an essential quality of the human response to the divine gift. The reception of saving grace is no mere passivity (as in the supposed case of infants baptised, or of all people for universalists): it involves a conscious exercise of the faculties of understanding and will, which cannot be uprooted from the symbiosis of affections. In the eyes of evangelicals, the three classical ingredients of saving faith remain indispensable: *notitia* (knowledge, at least minimal information of Gospel truth – as they maintain against forms of liberalism and existential neo-orthodoxy); *assensus* (agreement, recognition of its truth-claims); and *fiducia* (trust, a definite move that terminates on Christ, in an intimate covenant-relationship). Hence the importance of what Bebbington calls conversionism, with the invitation to make a decision for Christ (cf. the magazine of the Billy Graham Association). Faith is understood to be purely receptive, yet not passive: a narrow ridge footpath, with the danger of slipping into the ravines of quietism and synergism on each side! The required amount of knowledge, for saving faith to be possible, is also a delicate issue for evangelicals, who are not entirely agreed.

5. Freedom from and for the world. Their awareness of the weight of sinfulness in human affairs leads evangelicals to adopt a sharply critical stance towards the “world”, the world of common mores, but more especially the world of culture and of politics. A maximum was reached in the first generation already, with the Radical Reformers whom the “Christian” world of the 1520s hunted out mercilessly, tortured, hanged and burned; it should not be too surprising if they thought that Satan was indeed the Prince of that world. Among other evangelicals, opposition to the world has hardened since the process of secularisation began erasing references to God from public life. To some extent, their attachment to Scripture and their experience of the Spirit have provided them with an alternative, or counter, culture. A majority of them belong to Free churches so-called, free from State control and interference. For most evangelicals, however, this freedom from the world does not entail any withdrawal in a ghetto or ivory tower. It is combined with a conquering freedom for the world: the endeavour to liberate as many individuals as possible from the godless and inhuman system that shapes the world, and thus to further Christ's kingdom on earth. Evangelicals have invested massively, for three centuries, in evangelisation, both in home countries and abroad (foreign missions). Though most of them would give priority to the actual preaching of the Gospel, in hope that persons will come to faith, they recognise as the second mission of the church to seek to improve life on earth for all people: to engage in relief, social, and even political action. The latter emphasis was recovered in the last four decades (Lausanne 1974 being considered a landmark), after an eclipse of about fifty years (the hard years when evangelicalism was all but cornered by the successes of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy), and in accordance with its earlier, especially Pietist, record. A theological locus both reflects and, in turn, shapes what evangelicals believe to be right in their relationship to the world: eschatology. It has achieved greater prominence among them than in other parts of Christendom. Their eschatology maintains a realistic view of the hereafter, that includes a literal expectation of a universal Judgement and separation of eternal destinies, and of Christ's Parousia as an event to occur in the continuity of historical time. Their eschatological views, with variations around the millennium issue and the future of Israel,

have provided strong impetus for missionary work and influenced their social involvement.

How do the discipline of orthodoxy and freedom enjoyed in the Spirit fit together? One cannot deny a degree of antagonism, and some failures in the attempt to manage the duality. Yet, basically, it is healthy, it is the very requirement of health and progress: like the antagonism of antagonist muscles. The model that should guide their harmonious complementarity is the Model of models, that of the divine Trinity. The line of orthodoxy corresponds to the Word, to the Son; the line of freedom, to the Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Son – the two distinct, and one.

See further: John H. Armstrong, ed, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Moody, 1996); James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (SCM, 1977); Nigel M. De S. Cameron, ed, *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology. Essays in Approach and Method* (Rutherford House Books, 1987); D.A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge, eds, *Scripture and Truth* (Zondervan, 1983) and *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Zondervan Academic, 1986); Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology. A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993); Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth. The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (InterVarsity Press, 1996); Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth. Collected Writings* (Christian Focus/Mentor, 2002); John Stott, *Evangelical Truth. A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness* (InterVarsity Press, 1999); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics. The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (HarperCollins, 1992); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). One can add in French, Henri Blocher, 'Qu'est-ce que la Vérité?' in *Hokhma* 12 (1979) 2-13 and 13 (1980) 38-49.